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Fixed Views VS Unfixed Certainties

by Sister Medhini

> Some of corrupt mind will speak;
> While others speak from truthful mind.
> The sage does not embark in debate born of this,
> And so, the sage is not fixed anywhere.
>
> How to transcend one's very own view
> When settled in preference, carried by zeal?
> One who has formed conclusions of his own
> Would speak in just the way he knows.
>
> The one who, even unasked, speaks
> To others of his own precepts and way
> Is ignoble in nature, the skilled would say
> Declaring himself on his own.
>
> The calm and self-extinguished monk
> Does not say of virtue "I am like this"
> He, says the skilled, is of noble nature,
> protruding nowhere in the world.
>
> Whatever ideas are made and done
> become polluted with preference:
> Wherever one sees his own advantage
> On that he rests his unstable peace.

Domains of views are not easy to surmount
where ideas are picked out and taken up.
And so, a man among these domains
In dropping one idea, takes hold of the next.

Nowhere in the world has one of clarity
A view made of being-this or not-being-that.
Clarified by giving up deception and conceit,
In what way would he, who is disengaged, go?

One engaged among ideas embarks in debate
But how to debate the disengaged – on what grounds?
It is not for him to take up and let go,
He has shaken off all views right here.

Octad on the Corrupt (Snp. 4.3)

There is a line of thinking regarding the practice of Dhamma that is fairly common, and which appears, on the surface, quite admirable and good. It goes along the following lines:

"Don't trust the mind. It is dangerous to think that you know something, because it is easy to build an ego out of knowledge, even knowledge of Dhamma. I don't feel the need to be certain of things. I'm okay with accepting that I am still ignorant and have much to learn."

The first thing to sort out in regard to this is what we mean by 'knowledge.' If by 'knowledge' you mean a kind of static fact or idea, then we can agree that it is indeed something for 'ego' to be built on. But there is another kind of knowledge, that can never be a fixed idea like this, but which is also certain beyond doubt, in a way that the first kind of knowledge never can be. It is only this second kind that I would call actual 'knowledge,' and this cannot be the basis for ego, because it removes the space for it.

Before trying to describe further what I mean by knowledge, I wanted to say one or two other things about fixed ideas or views. The main point is that it doesn't really matter what the idea is about, or how correct it might appear to be in terms of the information it contains: relying on, and taking for granted, *any* idea or 'statement of fact,' is what we can call 'trusting the mind'.

In this sense, even the idea that, 'I don't know, my understanding is incomplete, I still have some wrong view,' can be just as dangerous as the idea 'I know, I am right.' Even if the first of those two statements sounds better and less egotistical, it can still be a comfort zone which, in the end, causes the same kinds of problems as the second. For example, if you say 'I don't know, I'm ignorant,' then it can take away some of the heaviness of the responsibility to think and say things that are actually true and right. If you make the disclaimer from the beginning that you are probably at least partly wrong, then you don't feel obliged to make your words and actions true and correct. If what you say does turn out to be wrong, it's not because *you* were really wrong, but because you happen to be ignorant.

In other words, accepting your ignorance as something that is just a static 'fact,' means it's not something you feel directly responsible for.[1] And in this way, the idea that you don't know becomes just something else to rest in; indirectly feeding the tendency to rely on views based on inspiration and preference. Far from being a genuine recognition of your own lack of certainty and wrong view, it's just covering it up even further.[2]

In short, you can be attached to the idea of knowing, but you can also be attached to the idea of not knowing, and in either case, the attachment to the idea is the problem, not the idea as such.

[1] If we were not responsible for maintaining ignorance (albeit 'ignorantly', and not deliberately) virtue, effort and wisdom would not be able to extract us from it – we would need the Grace of God or some similar concept.

[2] This shows that the Dhammapada verse that says 'a fool who understands that he is a fool is wise to that extent' (Dhp 63) is not as trivial as it might look at first glance. Understanding one's own lack of understanding is not a simple matter of accepting or declaring that you don't understand, not least because it is very uncomfortable to admit it honestly. Real recognition of doubt or uncertainty involves at least a degree of anxiety; the feeling that something is wrong, without knowing what, nor how to resolve it.

How does one become attached to such ideas? The answer is: 'by trusting the mind,' and by this I mean taking an idea for granted, in other words, *not recognising it as an idea.*

It is because of this bad faith that one ends up feeling certain about what is inherently subject to doubt. Some common examples of this include things like "The sun will rise in the east tomorrow"; "I was born in X town"; "All swans are white"; "There is no such thing as a unicorn."

But – and this is a very important 'but' – 'not trusting the mind' does not mean arbitrarily questioning everything and anything, a kind of blanket denial of any certain or absolute statement. On the contrary, there are things that you can't help knowing regardless of whether you want to or not, and doubting these, or at least overlooking their certainty, is bad faith just as surely as it is bad faith to be certain of what is doubtful.

Some examples of things that are 'already known' in this sense include: "I am currently sitting down [or insert whatever body posture you are in]"; "Black is not white"; "All circles are round"; "Pain is not pleasant."[3]

These are examples of statements that simply describe what it means for things to be the way they are, as they are experienced. They are not explaining them, or giving any new information. In a sense, they don't really *say* anything at all, which is one of the reasons they tend to get overlooked – they are so obvious that one doesn't usually think them important or worth noticing. But this is also exactly why they are certain, and why they are important.

Note that the difference between certainty and uncertainty does not depend on *what* these statements say, but on how you take them, and what is your basis for making them. It's possible to take anything at all as an idea and to rely on it as an idea, rather than as referring to one's own experience and describing its nature. Someone who accepts, for example, 'pain is not pleasant' *as a static idea or fact*, is still 'trusting the mind' and is wrong for this reason, even though whenever they feel pain, it is indeed not pleasant. Because of this, if there happens to come along a very awe-inspiring Spiritual Leader with a lot of prestige, claiming to Know and See; and he makes a brilliant argument about how, in Ultimate Reality seen through Higher Consciousness, pain can actually be pleasant; then that person will be able to doubt their former belief that pain is never pleasant. (Even though whenever they feel pain, it is still not pleasant.)

The same applies even if you do actually discern the nature of pain through your own experience once or twice, to the point of being able to describe it accurately without needing to refer to an idea or view – but then afterwards go on to make it into a static notion or memory.

If anyone asks the question 'Is pain ever pleasant?' you then just refer to the memory or idea of what you previously saw, overlooking the experience as it is here and now. This is a very easy trap to fall into, because it is this kind of 'dead fish,' of an idea, easy to grasp, that one is used to dealing with. (In fact, it's precisely because of feeling the need to grasp it in this way that one creates a dead fish, ignoring all the slippery live ones.)

So the statement 'pain is not pleasant' is certain in the sense I'm talking about *only* when it refers directly to the present experience. As such, it cannot be a fixed, theoretical 'fact,' and also cannot be doubted. But it is also, clearly, timeless. The certainty of it is completely universal: it is about what it *means* for pain to be pain. When I say 'pain is not pleasant' I don't mean '*this* pain here is not pleasant' (suggesting that it might not apply to other pains on different occasions) but '*all* pain is, by definition, not pleasant,' (although that is still being discerned on the basis of this pain right here.)

The reason that all this is important is because the statement that 'all arisen things are impermanent' is of exactly the same kind as those described above, and is certain in exactly the same way. If someone is not able

[3]The suttas are full of these types of statements. To gives just a couple of examples: 'There are some ascetics and brahmins who perceive that it's day when in fact it's night, or perceive that it's night when in fact it's day. This way of being of theirs is muddled, I say. I perceive that it's night when in fact it is night, and perceive that it's day when in fact it is day.' (MN 4) 'On the occasion when a man feels pleasant feeling he does not feel painful feeling or neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling: on that occasion he feels only pleasant feeling.' (DN 74) 'Furthermore, when a bhikkhu is walking he understands: 'I am walking.' When standing he understands: 'I am standing.' When sitting he understands: 'I am sitting.' And when lying down he understands: 'I am lying down.' (MN 10.) Every description of the practice of *satipaṭṭhānā* or recollection is also an example of the same principle.

to see even these ordinary certainties, it will be impossible for them to see the certainty of impermanence.

I will have a couple more things to say about that, but before I do, I want to address a lurking objection that sometimes arises in regard to this subject: "But a *puthujjana* is *certain* that he has a self."

The idea with this objection is that if a *puthujjana* is wrong in being certain that he has a self, then he might also be wrong about other things of which he is seemingly certain. And so, we might conclude, as a *puthujjana*, one is not permitted to be certain of anything.

There is more than one problem with this way of thinking, some of which might already be clear from what has already been said. But the main point I want to make about it can be made with the help of a simile, which goes like this:

There is a moth flying in circles around a flame. The reason for this, so the Latest Science informs us, is not that the moth is attracted to the flame as used to be assumed, but because the light confuses his perception of direction. When he attempts to fly in a straight line, and seems from his point of view to be flying in a straight line, he instead ends up flying in circles that bring him closer and closer to the source of light (which then, of course, confuses his sense of direction even further.)

Now, suppose this moth were to hear from somewhere that although he appears to be flying in a straight line, he is, in reality, flying in circles. How should he think, then, so as to overcome the confusion and perhaps free himself from danger? In particular, would it help him to dismiss the very real impression he has of flying in a straight line as an Unreal and Uncertain illusion, adding on top of it what is, from his point of view, the purely theoretical notion that 'In Reality, I am Flying In Circles'?

It's obvious that this theoretical notion makes no difference at all to the fact that the moth still perceives himself to be flying straight, and is still perilously close to the flame. But aside from this, it results in adding a further layer of self-deception to the illusion of the light, making the problem worse. Once the moth starts denying parts of his own experience in this way, he may now feel free to ignore other aspects of it – such as the heat he feels as he gets closer and closer to the flame.[4]

The only way for him to get out of his predicament would be to understand why the impression of flying in a straight line is not what it appears to be. But this can only be done on the basis of first admitting it for what it is.

For the same reason, one of the worst mistakes you can make as puthujjana is to deny the reality of things that you are certain of, including your own sense of self. You are guaranteed to be closer to 'seeing things as they really are' by honestly admitting, and describing as accurately as possible, your actual lived experience as you really see it, *especially* if this differs from the ideas and information you have of how you are supposed to be seeing it. (And this applies to everybody, *puthujjana* or not.)

For someone who is able to admit this, there are the following points that can become clear regarding the 'certainty' of one's own self, which are relevant to understanding it for what it is (i.e. not what it appears to be):

First, it is obvious that one is not fabricating a false belief in self out of nowhere and holding to it out of sheer stubbornness. A *puthujjana's* 'certainty' of his self is not just a kind of pig-headed refusal to change his mind (if only abandoning ignorance were that easy).

But at the same time, an authentic recognition of one's own self is invariably bound up with at least a degree of anxiety and doubt, and comes with various questions that demand to be answered and yet are clearly unanswerable.[5] The knowledge of one's own self is inherently something uneasy, ambiguous, and even contradictory – yet still unmistakably *there*. In other words, it contains internal evidence of involving some sort of mistake, even if one can't see what the mistake is. ('Why do I feel more heat the more I fly away from the flame?')

[4] We might even suspect that turning a blind eye to the imminent sense of danger (which brings some measure of relief for someone who does not see the escape from it) is, at least in part, the real motivation for adopting this sort of view in the first place.

[5] The questions of the *puttujhana* in MN 2 are the ideal illustrations of this: 'Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? This creature—where did it come from? And where will it go?'

The bad faith of both kinds described earlier – being certain about what is uncertain, and not recognising the certainty of what is certain – is actually central to this mistake. A *puthujjana* is certain of *something*, which he *believes*, or takes for granted, to be his self. However, he is habitually trained in turning a blind eye to certainties, and holding beliefs as though they were certain. And so he cannot distinguish the 'belief' that identifies his self as a kind of superfluous and unnecessary taint of the phenomenon whose certainty (and impermanence) underlies it.

The crucial point, especially when it comes to undoing this, is that it's not simply a matter of intellectually sorting out the difference between certain and uncertain statements. (This would not require a Buddha – a decent logician would be good enough.) The unwholesome 'training' I'm referring to is on the level of day-to-day attitudes, habits and actions; and it can be basically be boiled down to appeasing doubts with explanations, and justifying actions with some form of excuse.

Some examples of this are things like: 'I'm angry because others are being cruel'; 'It's okay because others do it' 'I should do this because others expect it,' 'I don't need to keep this rule because I'm not a monk;'; 'I'm justified in saying this because there's a tradition of it[6]; 'It's not a waste of time because it's to do with the Dhamma'; 'Others don't see this, so I must be imagining it (or they must be lying)'; 'It's because of certain hormones in the brain'; 'It's because I'm ignorant'; 'I mustn't do it because it's against the rule,' 'If the teacher says it, it must be right,'; 'I must not do this because it is bad.'
And so on.

It will be clear that these types of acts of body, speech and mind come in varying degrees of subtlety and are extremely pervasive. What they all have in common is that they are 'trusting the mind'. They take for granted an idea that is uncertain – "Others / things in the world are like X, Y or Z" – and prioritise it over and above what is absolutely certain, because it is the very basis for that same action: namely the intention behind it, and the feeling that it is rooted in, whether agreeable, disagreeable, or neither-agreeable-nor-disagreeable.

Anything that goes against the basic precepts follows this principle. And so it is not incidental that the most practical way to train in 'self-effacement' – in other words, to undo the bad faith involved in maintaining one's sense of self – is described by MN 8 in the following terms:

> 'Others will be cruel, but here we will not be cruel.'
> 'Others will kill living beings, but here we will not kill living beings.' 'Others will steal, but here we will not steal.'
> 'Others will be unchaste, but here we will not be unchaste.'
> 'Others will lie, but here we will not lie.'
> …..
> 'Others will be jealous, but here we will be without jealousy.'
> 'Others will be stingy, but here we will be without stinginess.'
> 'Others will be devious, but here we will not be devious.'
>
> MN 8

The point of putting in this specific way – 'Although others will do X, here we will not do X' – is that, while unwholesome actions always involve some form of the kinds of denials and excuses I've been describing, even the undertaking of 'wholesome' actions needs to be developed with an attitude that does not depend on any idea relating to 'others' in order to justify or support it. (And here, 'an idea relating to others' ultimately means any idea at all, whether its content involves 'the world', or 'my self' or even 'my mind.')

Of course, one will inevitably begin by relying on such ideas. The point then, (which requires already being established in quite a degree of virtue and restraint,) is simply to start noticing whenever you are falling back on *any* idea to explain or justify what you believe and how you act; including in seemingly 'good' ways. You cannot get rid of these ideas, nor do you need to, but you can become aware of them *as ideas*, and this is already enough to avoid taking them for granted as a basis for actions and views.

The other side of this same coin is to start recognising or admitting the intention, or even more immediately,

[6] 'Tradition', it's good to note, means the particular tradition with which one feels associated, even if that happens to be a very tiny minority in relation to the general tradition of 'Buddhism'.

the pain or pleasure behind whatever you may be doing. This is possible precisely because it precedes any idea, explanation or excuse for it, and as such, is already known beyond doubt.

Practically speaking, this feeling will most accurately be found right where your 'sense of self' is. This point leads me finally back to what I mentioned earlier in regard to the certainty of the statement that 'all arisen things are impermanent.' Like the example of 'pain is not pleasant' which does not require examination of a large number of painful experiences, because it is about what it *means* for pain to be pain; the statement that 'all arisen things are impermanent' is a description of what it *means* for an arisen thing to be an arisen thing.

This means that in order to see the certainty of impermanence, all you need is one clear and undiluted example of an arisen thing. All the difficulty in seeing it is to do with obtaining just one such example.

The problem is that whatever is seen 'ignorantly' (i.e. through eyes of *avijja*) is not an arisen thing in its entirety, but 'an object (appearing to me)' or 'me (looking at an object)'.[7] In other words, no matter where and what you look at, 'you' are there in the background looking at it, and whatever impermanence you see in any object will be only a kind of relative impermanence against 'you', which by definition is a kind of unchanging reference point for everything else.

This is why learning to recognise that which is already certain or known, in the sense that's relevant to this problem, comes down to the same thing as becoming aware of the 'background' of your experience, which is where your 'self' is. Or, more accurately, it is where certain less obvious aspects of whatever has arisen are always being pushed out of the picture and overlooked (through prioritising ideas, sense objects, explanations as described above), and that is how they are implicitly identified as one's self. The point of the practice is to get to see whatever is 'in the background' as simply an inseparable aspect of the entirety of whatever has arisen.

It will be obvious from all that has gone before, but might be worth repeating nonetheless, that 'the background' is not a fixed or static thing. It just refers to the fact that, to take again the example of feeling, whatever is experienced is *felt* (as agreeable, disagreeable or neither), and the feeling is always 'in the background' in regard to the experience. Whenever you turn to 'look' directly at feeling, now what you are looking at is no longer feeling, but an idea of it; and that in turn involves feeling in regard to *it*.

So in order to know *vedana* for what it is, you have to know it *through* 'feeling it' in regard to things you are experiencing, without making an idea out of it. In other words, you have to learn how to let it be what it is on its own terms; by 'enduring it,' and not acting out of it, whether by leaning towards or away from whatever thing is being felt.

It's through this 'leaning' and acting out, far more than any lack of active thinking about it, that what is already known gets ignored, pushed out of the picture, and identified as one's self. And so, if you train towards not acting out of feeling to any extent at all, you will be making it possible to see its impermanence, and practising self-effacement, even if everything else I've attempted to say here goes in one ear and out the other.

Living Under An Authority

PDF of the article

- **by Sister Medhini**

As long as one is alive, being subject to some sort of authority or authorities is inevitable[1]. An authority is here meant in a rather general sense of something or someone who is in a position to exert influence or control over your behavior or circumstances, in ways that may be covert or overt.

Most of the time, an authority has to either convince, persuade or hypnotize us that to follow his rule is indeed what is for our benefit and is the best thing to do, (so that we do so of our own accord); or use more

[7] "Q. When is a thing not a thing? A. When it is mine." (Seeking the Path, 2010 p. 411)

subtle ways of making life a bit less agreeable for people who don't do so, so that they will modify their behavior as a reflex, but without being generally aware of why they are doing so. As a last resort, authorities may turn to brute force. But this is unsustainable over long periods and with large numbers of people. So generally it is only used in certain extreme cases (i.e. the inmates of prisons), or extreme scenarios (war, etc.)

An example of authority benignly doing its job in the first manner would be something like city councils providing footpaths for people to walk on in cities, while the rest of the road is designated for cars. I've never heard anyone complaining about the curtailment of their freedom to walk in whatever part of the road they please. I would bet that very few people even see this as an imposed structure on their behavior by an authority, (although it is). The arrangement is simply taken for granted, for the rather good reason that it factually works. And there is a generally shared understanding of this.

Obviously, it would be good – ideal – if every form of imposed structure on people's behavior by authorities, could be like this; and would always be something that everyone could comply with willingly and in full awareness. But what is required for that is that everyone involved should have a shared understanding of, and agreement on, the arrangement that will be for the welfare of all; or at least a common *view* as to the *principles* governing such an arrangement. And this is an impossibility. Even in very small and specific communities, it is close to impossible, though not *entirely* impossible.[2]

So practically always, at least some of the people will need some persuading, and even with much persuasion and propaganda, many people will need a degree of faith that the authority knows what is best for them better than they themselves do, or they will follow orders with a degree of skepticism and a degree of reluctance, just for the sake of not being harassed by the authority or by others.

Owner of your actions

The first important point to understand regarding this is the following: no authority can *make* anyone do anything.

Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions; originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, and have their actions as their refuge. – MN 135

Nobody else can possibly be responsible for your own deed. All an authority can do is impose certain consequences for not acting according to their law; or offer certain rewards for acting according to their law. They can also (more underhandly) choose to curtail or control people's access to information, or use other means to take advantage of people's inauthenticity so that although people appear to be doing something 'of their own accord'; in truth, almost nobody is genuinely taking responsibility for their own choice to do such and such thing, but rather acting out of fear or a sense of duty to do what they are 'supposed to be doing.'

Or, In the best case, if the authority has some wisdom, they can clearly and properly set forth, according to proper reasoning, why acting in such and such a way is for your welfare and benefit, acting in such and such ways is for your harm and the harm of others; so that you understand for yourself why it is better to act in this way and can take responsibility for that choice, without resenting the authority.[3]

So to re-emphasize, no authority can make anyone act in a particular way. All they can do is influence the consequences of acting in one way or another. Yet, for much of their lives, people end up doing lots of things – even most things – with the impression of being to some extent *obliged* to do them. What this impression practically involves is the belief that there *is no other choice.* In truth, though, there is always another choice to act differently – which will necessarily have consequences. Some are worse than others.

When somebody cannot bear so much as thinking about certain kinds of consequences, they habitually shut their eyes to the mere possibility of a whole range of actions that might provoke such consequences, and consequently, feel *obliged* to act in certain ways. (This is only part of the story, though, because while entertaining the possibility of an action with very unpleasant consequences is painful enough, it is still generally not as painful as having to face, time and time again, the need to make a decision 'what should I do?' with the full weight of that decision lying squarely on one's own shoulders.)

Being authentic involves refusing to allow yourself any notion of being obliged to do anything, and taking responsibility for every single choice you make. This is what will force you to be honest about why you are choosing one thing and not another. To take a common contemporary example, if somebody has doubts about a certain vaccine but happens to have a job for which the vaccine is mandatory, it would be easy for them to feel that they are being obliged to be vaccinated against their will; not acknowledging the fact that the choice to act differently is still open to them, though the consequences of it might be quite unpleasant to face. An authentic person would be able to reflect, for example, *I'm getting this vaccine because, although I don't trust that I have at hand all the relevant information, and I do think I could be taking a risk; on the whole, I still don't see this as justifying giving up my job while having children to support.* (It should of course be borne in mind that this is just one example for illustrative purposes, the reader may replace it with whatever equivalent example they can think of.)

What is not yours

Perhaps slightly harder to understand, but equally important, is the point that not only are you solely responsible for your own actions, but you are responsible for; the owner of, *solely* your own actions – *nothing else*.

Anyone who has been born is subject to all sorts of changes, disturbances, and troubles that are *utterly inaccessible* to their control. The actions of other people, the quality and quantity of information you have access to, the words of other people, the conditions of the world; the weather, and the state of health and decline of your own body – all come under this. In other words, you can decide what you do; but that choice and the motivation for it is always strictly internal; there is no way for your choice to access things beyond it, just as there is no way for other things or people to access the domain of your own intentional choice.

Specifically, when you make a choice out of wanting to avoid a certain unpleasant result, or wanting to arrive at a certain pleasant result, any result that comes about whether it is experienced as pleasant or unpleasant – is in an entirely different domain. It happens, so to speak, by itself.

So for instance, in the example above, somebody might say 'But it's not *right* that they make vaccination mandatory for nurses, there *shouldn't* be this consequence for this kind of choice.' But these are quite clearly things that belong to others, and that pertains in fact to an entire domain that doesn't and cannot belong to you. Whether other people think and act rightly or wrongly, belongs to them; what belongs to you are, for instance, the words that you can say to them, but you can't give them anything more than the sound of your voice. Equally, in terms of your own body's health or sickness, all that you have is the ability to administer medicine and the possibility to investigate the causes of disease, but that is as far as it goes. Whether the medicine works and how it works, belongs to what is essentially the nature of matter, a different domain that is totally beyond your ability to access.

Thinking rightly or wrongly depends on the degree to which our thought corresponds to how things actually are. Whenever people act wrongly and harmfully, they are trying to exert control and mastery over things (like other people's actions) that can't possibly be controlled by them.

So an authority can at any time arbitrarily decide to impose restrictions and strictures on your own daily life whenever they so choose. If a person is bothered by this, although the change to their life might be troublesome in itself in various ways, what is truly bothersome is the fact that it should be possible at all. (That's when you hear people saying things like 'that shouldn't be allowed… we should be consulted… there should be some process or other…' etc.) But this comes back to why I began with this first point, which is something a person needs to see for themselves at least to some extent if any of this is to be comprehensible: to live as a human being (or indeed any kind of being) is to have *some* sort of authority over you. Such that the conditions of your life and the consequences of everyday actions may be suddenly changed at any moment.

So this bother is a recognition of something much more deep-rooted and universal, which is this very discrepancy I'm trying to get at: those things that one naturally takes to be one's own and holds dear, are fundamentally *not* one's own. (Because if some aspect of your life may be arbitrarily taken away by some authority or other, whether for valid reasons or not, then it must necessarily belong more to the authority than it does to you.)

"*I have sons, I have wealth."*

Thus the fool frets.

He himself is not his own -.

How then, sons? How then, wealth? – Dhp 62

Being a fundamental bother, pertaining to the nature of things in general, the only way to overcome it is to address it at this level. (rather than, say, taking up specific issues with the city council or what-have-you.)

This is done by, in a nutshell, learning how to stop mistakenly holding as your own those things which cannot be your own.

How to let go of what isn't yours.

This phrase, 'let go of what isn't yours,' is repeated many times in the suttas, and is something that is repeated a lot in Buddhism generally. The problem is that at least most people if they try to simply *do* this directly, will probably end up doing it wrongly. (The reason being that they would be trying to 'let go' of things by way of the exact same attitude and view with which they were holding those things from the beginning. In other words, if it were really up to you whether to let go of something or to keep it, then we wouldn't have a problem. The point is to recognize that regardless of whether you let go or not, the thing was never yours, to begin with.)

That is why I have been emphasizing responsibility: it might seem paradoxical, but the most practical way to let go of futile suffering is to *first fully accept* all the responsibility wherever you possibly can – and never allow yourself to be obliged to act in any way. If a person were to genuinely take this as a practice and keep it in mind throughout everything they were to do, it would naturally become possible for them to give up the source of this bother (and ultimately the source of all bother whatsoever.)

One practical example of this at a relatively mundane level would follow from the one I gave above: if somebody took a vaccine while feeling obliged to do so, either because of a general sense of duty despite some misgivings, or even because it was mandatory for them to keep their job; if they later find out that the authority – who they deem responsible for *making* them take the vaccine – had not been honest, and/or the vaccine turns out to have worse side-effects than imagined, their mind will then definitely give rise to quite a lot of anger, frustration, and resentment.

But if somebody took a vaccine while being fully clear and authentic about their reasons for doing so, aware that they were taking a risk, and that they were choosing to do so because it was still overall the better choice rather than the available alternatives – then they might find out the exact same information, or even undergo some actual ill-effect of vaccination, but would suffer far less mental disturbance and turmoil on account of it. Nor would this make them any less capable of seeing and judging the immorality of the actions of the relevant authorities.

More generally, if you start correctly seeing the domain of your responsibility, this will also naturally make you more able to see where it ends; what is *not* in your hand and not up to you. This includes pretty much everything else, most pertinently the things that happen to you, and whether they are pleasant or unpleasant.

You could then recognize the following very important truth: that aversion, fear, or really any kind of *bother* regarding anything that can arise, is directly maintained by assuming that the painful thing *is* the situation, and so trying to deal with it, avoid it, get rid of it, etc – to get rid of the pain of it. (Incidentally, but importantly, it's also maintained by acting on the corresponding assumption regarding *pleasant* things, assuming that pleasure is to be found *in* a particular experience or situation; so I must get it, access it, experience it, have it.) In trying to deal with things on this level, you keep maintaining the notion that you *could* have some say in the situation, that you can 'get at it'. Which is exactly how you allow things to 'get at you'.

An image that might help to convey this is a small room, with six windows or doors, and this room confines you, while you keep trying to get out of it. But each time you break down one of its windows or doors or

try and go out to the thing you see passing outside, the initial release quickly reveals itself to be another – slightly smaller – version of the exact same room.

For as long as you keep trying to escape in that way, you will maintain the implicit assumption that this sort of escape *can* provide release. And you won't see how your escape attempts are what is making the room even smaller, the confinement even tighter, nor will it be possible to see the genuine release. And that is because the genuine release is not *outside* of the confinement, but more like a kind of reconfiguration of your vision so that you can see how the same thing is not confining at all anymore – precisely because you see that there is no need to escape in that way, *which was never possible to the begin with.*

In practical terms, it comes down, again, to realize that any suffering at all is never because of the situation, but purely because of the aversion or craving regarding it: an entirely unnecessary, futile, and gratuitous thing for which you are directly and solely responsible. Again, this sentence can be stated theoretically, but it has to be recognized through truly seeing that which is *not up to you*: whatever you do, in a fundamental sense your situation is always going its own way. It gets better sometimes, it gets worse sometimes. This would be how you can see that your only responsibility therein is also what is at the root of all that is painful and suffering in it, namely the craving, which is maintained *by trying to deal with the situation so as to get rid of the pain of it*. And if you were to see this you could let go of it, which is when you would not suffer albeit amidst the same circumstances that would previously have caused you much suffering.

The extremity

It might be asked whether there is any limit to this principle. – I have said 'no matter what the situation'; is this a figure of speech that in some extreme scenario no longer holds true? The answer is that there are no limits whatsoever to how far it *can* be taken, depending on how seriously one takes the fundamental problem of one's life and the degree of effort one is prepared to dedicate to the task of overcoming it. The suttas give many rather extreme examples of people who, having developed their minds along such lines, do not experience anguish, even amidst the worst kinds of suffering. My favorite is the story of a laywoman called 'Nanda's mother,' who recounts the following:

I had an only son called Nanda who was dear and pleasing to me. The rulers forcibly abducted him on some pretext and had him executed. But when my son was under arrest or being arrested, imprisoned or being put in prison, killed or being killed, I cannot recall any change in the state of my mind." – AN 7.53.

This might seem initially like a totally incomprehensible or impossible feat, only explicable by some sort of mystical or magical transformation of a person into some sort of robot. (And many Buddhists do end up taking it like this, though they might not admit it). But it is simply the result of the same principle as we have been describing being applied and developed to its full extent.

From a slightly different angle, if one takes responsibility for choosing to live in the domain of a certain authority that one considers to be oppressive, then the first natural reaction is to search for a different place where there will be a less oppressive authority in charge. But still, as I said, one will have to live under some authority or another; and this principle has no limit: here is a passage from the suttas spoken by Mara, who in the suttas is a deity who holds the position of a top bureaucrat over the system of samsara, (by which he is equally fully bound).

"*The eye is mine, ascetic, forms are mine, eye-contact and its base of consciousness are mine. Where can you go, ascetic, to escape from me? The ear is mine, ascetic, sounds are mine … The nose is mine, ascetic, odors are mine … The tongue is mine, ascetic, tastes are mine … The body is mine, ascetic, tactile objects are mine … The mind is mine, ascetic, mental phenomena are mine, mind-contact and its base of consciousness are mine. Where can you go, ascetic, to escape from me?" – SN 4.19*

In another sense, pertinently, Mara is also called the King of Death, and this could be taken in a very literal sense. To be in the realm of Mara is to be subject to old age and death. That is what holds sway over the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. That is the ultimate authority. And the escape from it is still the same.

"*That of which they say 'It's mine,'*

And those who speak in terms of 'mine'—

If your mind exists among these,

You won't escape me, ascetic."

The Blessed One:

"*That which they speak of is not mine,*

I'm not one of those who speak of mine.

You should know thus, O Evil One:

Even my path you will not see." – SN 4.19

1 'you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed' – Bob Dylan

2 The requirement is pretty much that such a community should be a community of noble disciples; i.e. people who possess the Right View, one of the characteristics of which is 'seeing right as right and wrong as wrong'; another characteristic being that all not only have the same goal – liberation from birth, death and suffering- but the same understanding of how to achieve that goal. Note that this is absolutely NOT the same as a cult, in which people voluntarily deny their own individual point of view in favour of that of the group and the leader – in this, rather, each person has individually come to an understanding of certain fundamental principles that are timeless and universal, and each of them are individually also defined as 'independent of others.' Unlike a cult, for such individuals it is irrelevant whether they are alone or in a group, aside from practical convenience and similar considerations. But because their understanding pertains to something universal, they will naturally be 'on the same page' at least as far as important things go, without needing very much in the way of micro-managed rules to govern their behavior.

3 Actually, if this is taken to its conclusion such an authority can't really be called 'an authority' in the usual sense of the word. The Buddha being the obvious example that comes to mind, who specifically stated on several occasions that it was not up to him whether people followed his instructions or not; and he particularly did *not* think of himself as an authority over the monks.

But Ananda, what does the Sangha expect from me? I have taught the Dhamma, Ananda, having made no secret opposed to the public. The Perfected One has no closed teacher's fist with regard to teachings. If anyone thinks, 'I shall take charge of the Sangha,' or 'the Sangha should refer to me,' let him make some statement about the Sangha; but the Perfected One does not think in this way.) – DN 16.

Straightening of Crookedness

by Sister Medhini

It is in virtue of intentionality that actions are actions.

The quality of an intention is its motivation. Whether an action is harmful or harmless; blameworthy or blameless; good or bad, depends entirely and solely on what motivates it.

Regardless of everything else – the specific situation, the immediate or superficial outcome, and whether people approve of it or not – an action motivated by greed cannot be harmless or blameless. The same applies to any action motivated by aversion (which includes fear, irritation, impatience and so on, as well as outright anger). And the same also applies to whatever is motivated by sheer carelessness or disregard.

These attitudes are, in themselves, the essence of limitation, discord and crookedness – they are, in short, suffering. And all they can do is perpetuate suffering.

Whenever beings have brought misery to themselves and to others, and whenever there has ever been conflict, oppression, cruelty and destruction, it has always been through actions born of greed, aversion and carelessness. Whenever beings act from these motivations, they participate in creating the misery of the world. They then inherit the misery of the world they create.

Therefore, if a person wants to cease to participate in the world's misery and its crookedness, his task is this: he should train himself to not act, speak or think in ways that are crooked by greed, crooked by aversion, or crooked by carelessness.

*

This task is not complicated. It is, however, subtle and challenging in a way that is not comparable to any other aim; and it is missed by virtually the entire world. What makes it so?

Acting in these crooked ways implies that one's entire perspective is crooked through and through. In particular: to the extent that one is greedy, they do not see their own greed, but only the thing they want. To the extent that one is averse, they do not see their own aversion, but only the thing they want rid of. To the extent that one is careless, they must be careless first and foremost of their own carelessness. In this way, one's vision of what one needs to give up is obscured by those very things.

So, since each person is already living to some degree greedily, aversely and carelessly, their very efforts to give up their own crookedness will begin crookedly. They will be too tight, (aiming to get rid of irrelevant things that do not pertain to the problem at hand) or too loose (failing to abandon important things that very much do pertain to the problem). Or, often, some of both.

How, then, to begin in such a way that, if it were followed through to its conclusion, would lead to unlimiting what is limited and straightening what is crooked, rather than creating further layers of limitation and another variety of crookedness?

*

Certain behaviours are of a nature to be always blameworthy and harmful. Killing is the first example: only one who is motivated by at least a degree of greed, aversion or carelessness, can deliberately kill another living creature. The same applies to stealing and lying. It also applies to sexual misbehaviour, and the use of intoxicants.

So for one wishing to train themselves in the task being described, these things prohibited by the five precepts are the first basic reference points for what one must be willing to not do, ever again.

Undertaking even this much, in the unconditional manner that the task demands, requires a degree of faith at first. It might be reasonably obvious that these actions are generally bad (especially when you are on the receiving end of them). But it cannot be self-evident from the beginning why they are always bad, without exception.

Even if you are not particularly tempted to act in such ways at this moment, a degree of honest reflection will show that situations could arise in which you would feel compelled to do so. They would seem to offer the only hope of getting out of a certain constraint, or relieving a particular kind of burden. And under the weight of that burden, and the force of that constraint, you would want to justify doing something drastic about it, even if there were no guarantee that it would work – even knowing that, sooner or later, a time will have to come when everything in your power will be powerless against it.

Even now in simply thinking about it, you can recognise and feel the unease in being liable to that precise kind of burden and constraint.

It is this unease – this suffering, and no other, that needs to be fully understood; for it is right here that there is all the difference between a crooked view and a straight one. If you could fully understand this very suffering and see the nature of this difference, right there and then you would be free from it.

*

The difference is this. The attitude of greed, aversion or carelessness that is present wherever there is that sense of burden and constraint, is the source of the entire burden and all of the constraint. There is no other source of suffering but this.

No matter what you might want: whether coarse, subtle, far, near, internal, external, great or little – while not having, and while having it; while keeping it and while losing it, the greedy attitude in regard to it is

suffering in the beginning, suffering in the middle and suffering in the end. No matter what you might fear, dislike, want rid of: while dreading it and while running from it, while avoiding it and while caught with it; the aversion in regard to it is all of the suffering in each and every way of it. And in whatever is neither wanted nor unwanted, the attitude of carelessly disregarding it is already suffering in and of itself.

But, as was said in the beginning: the nature of being greedy is to only see the thing you want, and not your own greed. And not seeing your own greed is how you continue to be greedy.

So to clearly see and comprehend the full and exact extent of your own greed while it is there, as opposed to later when you have already acted out of it; would have to mean ceasing to be greedy right there and then. Only then would you truly see that very greed as the source of suffering. And by the same token you would know clearly what greed is, and you would know exactly how to not act in ways that are crooked by greed – or aversion, or carelessness – which are really just different styles of the same thing.

*

This is not something that one can simply choose to see, because both one's choices and one's seeing are crooked from the start. By being greedy, you continue to not see your own greed. And 'being greedy' means doing greedy actions, speaking greedy words and thinking greedy thoughts.

That is why the only possible beginning that can lead one in the right direction is resolving to not do actions based on that specific kind of burdened-and-constrained motivation, for which the basic precepts are the essential reference points.

It is better to begin by sincerely taking just the five precepts as reference points in this sense, then to take on a great many rules to follow just because they are rules. Having developed this to a sufficient degree, the eight precepts are not seen as 'additional rules'. They are, rather, a more refined or detailed description of the very same framework in which one is already training. (The most important example of this is the deliberately vague phrase 'sexual misbehaviour' – one could regard 'non-celibacy' as simply a less vague term for the same precept.) And the entire gradual training and practice can, and should, be seen as nothing but the development and refinement of this same thread through to its conclusion in every respect. There is nothing extra to add to it.

Not perpetuating these actions, and not adding anything else to fill the gap: that is how there is the un-limiting of what is limited and the straightening of what is crooked in your own perspective – in spite of yourself.

It has to be 'in spite of yourself' in this way, and it is this that makes this task so challenging in a way unlike any other: in order to even begin to purify your own point of view, you must be willing to undermine and put that point of view second – which each person implicitly cherishes and wants to keep above all else.

Yet even here, the root cause of the difficulty is one and the same: whatever anxiety and unease there is in the thought of undermining the thing one wants to keep, is rooted in nothing but the greed of wanting to keep it.

*

> Greedy, absorbed and entranced with pleasures,
>
> They are hard to correct, being set in crooked ways.
>
> Brought into suffering, they lament:
>
> "What will become of us when we fall from here?"
>
> So a person should train themselves in this way:
>
> Whatever they might recognise as crooked in the world,
>
> They should not let that cause them to act crookedly,
>
> For this life is not long, as the wise would say.

Snp 4.2

"Bhikkhus, abandon the unwholesome! It is possible to abandon the unwholesome. If it were not possible to abandon the unwholesome, I would not say:"Bhikkhus, abandon the unwholesome!' But because it is possible to abandon the unwholesome, I say: 'Bhikkhus, abandon the unwholesome!'

If this abandoning of the unwholesome led to harm and suffering, I would not tell you to abandon it. But because the abandoning of the unwholesome leads to welfare and happiness, I say: 'Bhikkhus, abandon the unwholesome!'

AN 2.19

A noble disciple understands the detrimental and its root, and the beneficial and its root. To this extent a noble disciple is one of right and straight view, who has absolute confidence in the Dhamma, and has come to the true Dhamma.

But what is the detrimental (unwholesome) and what is its root? And what is the beneficial and what is its root? Killing living beings, stealing, and sexual misconduct; speech that's false, divisive, harsh, or frivolous; longing, aversion, and wrong view. This is called the detrimental.

And what is the root of the detrimental? Greed, aversion, and muddledness (= carelessness, disregard). This is called the root of the detrimental.

And what is the beneficial? Abstaining from killing living beings, stealing, and sexual misconduct; avoiding speech that's false, divisive, harsh, or frivolous; non-longing, non-ill-will, and right view. This is called the beneficial.

And what is the root of the beneficial? Non-greed, non-aversion, and non-muddledness. This is called the root of the beneficial.

MN 9

'Bhikkhus, one who sees suffering also sees the origin of suffering, also sees the cessation of suffering, also sees the way leading to the cessation of suffering. One who sees the origin of suffering also sees suffering, also sees the cessation of suffering, also sees the way leading to the cessation of suffering. One who sees the cessation of suffering also sees suffering, also sees the origin of suffering, also sees the way leading to the cessation of suffering. One who sees the way leading to the cessation of suffering also sees suffering, also sees the origin of suffering, also sees the cessation of suffering.' (SN 56.30)

The king asked: 'Why is it, friend chariotmaker, that the wheel that took six days to finish rolled as far as the impetus carried it, and then wobbled and fell to the ground, while the wheel that took six months less six days to finish rolled as far as the impetus carried it and then stood still as if fixed on an axle?'

"The chariotmaker replied: 'The wheel that took six days to finish, lord, has a rim that is crooked, faulty, and defective; spokes that are crooked, faulty, and defective; and a nave that is crooked, faulty, and defective. For this reason, it rolled as far as the impetus carried it and then it wobbled and fell to the ground. But the wheel that took six months less six days to finish has a rim without crookedness, faults, and defects; it has spokes without crookedness, faults, and defects; and it has a nave that is without crookedness, faults, and defects. For this reason, it rolled as far as the impetus carried it and then stood still as if fixed on an axle.'

"It may be, bhikkhus, that you think: 'On that occasion the chariotmaker was someone else.' But you should not think in such a way. On that occasion, I myself was the chariotmaker. Then I was skilled in crookedness, faults, and defects in wood. But now I am the Arahant, the Perfectly Enlightened One, skilled in crookedness, faults, and defects of the body; skilled in crookedness, faults, and defects of speech; and skilled in crookedness, faults, and defects of mind.

"Any bhikkhu or bhikkhunī who has not abandoned crookedness, faults, and defects of the body, speech, and mind has fallen down from this Dhamma and discipline, just as the wheel that was finished in six days fell to the ground.

"Any bhikkhu or bhikkhunī who has abandoned crookedness, faults, and defects of the body, speech, and mind is established in this Dhamma and discipline, just as the wheel that was finished in six months less six days remained standing.

"Therefore, bhikkhus, you should train yourselves thus: 'We will abandon crookedness, faults, and defects of the body; we will abandon crookedness, faults, and defects of speech; we will abandon crookedness, faults, and defects of the mind.' It is in this way that you should train yourselves."

AN 3.15

Homelessness is Nibbana

by Sister Medhini

1. There are a range of different views and positions on the question of whether one 'must be a monk to practice the Dhamma' or whether the Buddha's teaching is 'only for monks' or not. Regardless of the particular stance, however, all seem to overlook the basic reason and context for one going forth that is explicitly described in the suttas – not only once or twice, but countless times. Here is one instance:

Formerly, friends, when living as a householder, I was without wisdom. Then the Tathagata, or his disciple, taught me the dhamma. On hearing that dhamma, I acquired faith in the Tathagata. ******With that faith, I reflected: "The household life is confined, a dusty path; going forth is open air. It is not easy, while settled at home, to lead this holy life, utterly perfect and entirely pure as a polished conch-shell.****** *Why don't I shave off my hair and beard, put on the ochre robes, and go forth from home into homelessness?*

MN 112

The main point of this passage, which seems to be quite easily missed, is the fact that seeing the household life as a claustrophobic and polluted atmosphere, where it is 'not easy to lead the holy life,' is far from being a personal whim that happens to occur to some people and not others. It is the immediate and natural consequence of hearing the dhamma, gaining faith in it, and reflecting on one's situation through that faith. And so if somebody is very committed to practicing the dhamma yet at the same time sees no problem or contradiction with living at home while doing so, then it is very likely because their idea of both the practice and the goal is quite different from what the monk in the above passage is referring to.[8]

2. The nature of the goal is described as follows, in again a very familiar passage that occurs repeatedly:

*This is peaceful, this is sublime, that is:****** the stilling of all activities, the relinquishment of all acquisitions*******, the destruction of craving, cessation – Nibbāna.*

AN 11.7

Household life, on the other hand, refers to the life that is bound up with acquisitions and the constant activity of acquiring, maintaining and protecting them. Similarly, a 'home' is basically a comfort zone; a situation that you regard as yours to manage according to your preference and where you have a sense of control and familiarity.

As such, the total and unconditional abandonment of household life should not be seen as something one may or may not have to do in order to then go on to practice and attain Nibbāna. – it *is* Nibbāna.

[8]There are of course many accounts of laypeople who heard the dhamma, gained faith and still chose not to become monks or were not able to; but what the above passage makes very clear is that their choice of living as a householder could only be made in spite of their faith, not because of it. To whatever degree they were to have reflected on the faith and the understanding of the dhamma they had gained, they too would have been seeing their environment filled with belongings and attachments as confining, dusty, entrapping and unsafe. And it is precisely this way of regarding it that would have been the basis for whatever degree of progress they made within their environment of household life.

That is why there can be no attainment of arahantship as a layperson, any more than there can be the relinquishment of all acquisition without relinquishing any acquisitions. A layman becomes an arahant precisely in virtue of giving up everything that makes him a layman. Along the same lines, only an arahant is incapable of returning to the household life[9], and strictly speaking, only he is said to be truly worthy of the designation 'bhikkhu' or 'renunciate'.

He for whom in all name and form

There is no sense of ownership

Who does not sorrow from what is not –

He is called a 'bhikkhu.'

Dhp 367

If this is not understood, it is quite natural for someone to 'go forth' as a monk only to seek new comfort zones and different ways to feel at home, so that in spite of wearing robes and adhering to rules, he is still very much a householder in the way that matters. Some degree of this is unavoidable: giving up any major worldly home will inevitably be done on the basis of leaning on a subtler one initially. This in itself is not a problem, as long as you are careful not to allow yourself to feel fully justified in doing so, or think that becoming a monk will do the work of relinquishment for you.

3. What all this implies is that practicing homelessness rightly does not actually start with ordaining as a monk, but with learning and gaining clarity and faith in regard to the harm and danger of acquisition, and the value of renunciation.

In terms of this reflection and understanding, the point that has to be very much stressed is that it is the comfort of household life that makes it 'crowded and dusty', much more so than all the hassle and burden that people put up with for the sake of that comfort. So, in order to place yourself at what is the very starting point of the gradual training in the suttas, you need to start thinking in a way that leads to seeing the dependency on whatever pleasures and comforts define 'home' for you, as confinement and dust.

What are these pleasures and comforts that constitute confinement? Although there are as many varieties of comfort zones as individuals[10], sensuality – that is to say, pleasures and attractions dependent on sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches – is the primordial comfort zone for anyone born human. Everything in household life aims at and circles around it, and, for one with faith in the dhamma reflecting rightly through that faith, it is this that is invariably seen as a baited trap.

4. This type of reflection is the *only* way to abandon these fundamental ties of the household life, which can only be fully relinquished on the level of the internal safety and delight in them (as opposed to somehow getting rid of, or becoming unpercepient of all agreeable sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches). The same in fact applies to giving up anything to which you are attached, even specific objects that you can choose to give away or physically remove yourself from. Being physically removed from something does not equate to giving it up – if it did, losing something dear would not entail suffering. The suffering of loss is not because of the absence of something, but because it is not given up. Equally, the pain of loss always fades sooner or later, without implying that there is any less internal attachment, which has just shifted from one thing to another, delighting here instead of there.

This should on no account be taken to mean that there is no need for physical separation from sensuality. What it does imply is that the degree of physical separation that is needed is no more and no less than what

[9] See AN 9.7 and 9.8

[10] A comfort zone need not even necessarily be physically 'comfortable' in order to qualify as such. For example, a stereotypical home is a well-furnished dwelling where one stays all the time, but equally, constantly moving from one situation to another without committing to anything can be a comfort zone for some. Company is a comfort zone for those who fear loneliness, but solitude can be a comfort zone for those who are insecure and anxious around others. Activity is a comfort zone for the restless, and inactivity is a comfort zone for the lazy. For someone set on doing everything their own way, being told what to do and having to obey an authority is uncomfortable, while for someone who takes comfort in rules and duties, questioning the rules and thinking for themselves is equally frightening. Wherever there is the pressure of greed, aversion and distraction, there is a comfort zone.

is outlined by the eight precepts, and that even this physical separation is, though necessary, not in itself a sufficient condition for relinquishing acquisition on the level that would free you[11].

The way of life of a monk, having gone forth, is the lifestyle that is shaped by the decision to live physically separate from engagement with the pleasures and concerns of the world. One should not be keeping this or that precept *because* of being a monk; rather, it is primarily the choice to *not* live in accordance with preference and comfort that makes somebody a monk. This way of living is what the precepts outline, and what the livelihood of a bhikkhu is meant to support.

5. "The world is unstable and swept away.

The world is shelterless and without a protector.

The world is without what is one's own, one must go on having left all behind.

The world is incomplete, insatiate, the slave of craving.

"Great king, these are the four summaries of the Dhamma that have been taught by the Blessed One who knows and sees, accomplished and fully enlightened. Knowing and seeing and hearing them, I went forth from the home life into homelessness."

MN 82

To contemplate and start seeing the confining nature of household life is not a very complex or intellectually taxing thing; but it is likely to be uneasy, especially if a person's starting point is undeveloped in virtue and honesty. Most people who have the aim of practicing the dhamma begin with at least a grain of the correct recognition, which is not about finding out something new, but rather admitting to yourself certain very obvious things that everyone already knows, but habitually distracts themselves from.

How do you know that anything is a comfort zone for you to begin with, even the most trivial? The only way to find a comfort zone is through the presence of potential anxiety at its periphery, where there is the possibility of its being threatened or being forced to step outside it. Every comfort zone is inherently unstable, and involves a corresponding pressure and compulsion to do things for the sake of remaining within it. The less you turn a blind eye to these – again, quite obvious – aspects of that which is your home, the less you will be able to feel at home in it, whether or not you are aiming to go from home to homelessness.

This does not mean that you must be incessantly plagued with existential anxiety and dread, such that if ever you happen to feel pleasant or neutral, it means you must be doing something wrong. It means only that if you are actively seeking to *avoid* whatever anxiety and dread does arise here – that would indeed be doing something wrong. That is why this reflection necessarily goes hand in hand with refraining from acting in ways that support the distraction from it, and fuel the intoxication with it; namely those actions motivated by greed, by aversion or by careless indolence and distraction. It is impossible to act out in these ways while maintaining the perspective outlined above, and even if the acting out is not very frequent, it will still impede any real clarity from developing in this regard. On the other hand, even if you do not try to deliberately contemplate the nature of household life, simply refusing to give in to actions that you know are unwholesome will unfailingly expose whatever you are taking as a comfort zone, and undermine it at the same time.

6. Supposing you are recognising the instability of your home life, and are able to bear the whatever degree of unease this might engender without immediately resorting to covering it up. What do you do next?

[11] Those who seek to justify non-abandonment of the world, sometimes not even keeping the precepts, often resort to the point that ultimately a person's external surroundings and possessions make no difference as long as they are detached. But the very fact that this is invariably used to justify *not* giving things up, rather than the alternative, is evidence that it does indeed make a difference. If it were to truly make no difference to you, you would have no problem with giving things up, and thus no reason to justify not doing so. Obviously, certain things cannot be given up without risk to life or health; food being the obvious example, which is why the instruction is to engage with it *only* for that reason. Furthermore, there are certain physical behaviours that are simply not possible to do without mental attachment involved (sexuality, killing, lying, stealing, deliberate self-intoxication), and therefore to suggest that one could give up the mental attachment without giving up these physical behaviours is literally like saying you could dry and season a tree branch while having it produce and ripen fruit at the same time. (See MN 22).

The almost inevitable tendency here is to treat the 'practice of dhamma' as something else that comes 'after' this – as an answer to it, that ends up being done at the expense of it. This is very natural, because that recognition is universally the direction in which nobody wants to look and everyone wants to escape. But it is also exactly where the practice not only begins, but how it progresses and where it ends. So the answer to the question of what to do next is, in the broadest terms, 'not forget about it.'

7. The one of broad wisdom has indeed found

The opening amidst confinement,

The Buddha who discovered jhāna,

The withdrawn chief bull, the sage."

"*Even amidst confinement they find it,*

The Dhamma for the attainment of Nibbāna—

Those who have acquired mindfulness,

Those perfectly well composed.

SN 2.7

The words 'confinement' and 'opening' translate 'sambādha' and 'okāsa', which are the same words that appear in the standard description quoted above of a householder deciding to go forth. This is not incidental, as should be obvious at this point. As noted above, leaving home to become a monk is not in itself the escape from the confinement of household life. Leaving the worldly home is, rather, done for the sake of uncovering and bringing to light the more fundamental situation that all who live are taking as 'home' by default; namely this living body and the mind it is paired with.

8. Every instruction that was given to monks by the Buddha is for the sake of maintaining awareness and perspective in regard to the extent and nature of this 'comfort zone' of one's own body and senses; deactivating the activities that fuel one's dependence on it, and composing the mind within it. But it's important to realise that training on this level is only applicable when you are already able to not rely on coarser and more specific comfort zones, whether those pertaining to the world or to the life of a monk[12]. There is a reason why every description of the practice of recollectedness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) states that it is done on the basis of 'dispelling longing and sorrowing in regard to the world.'

If this is not sufficiently developed, then it will almost certainly be quite hard to see how, say, recollection of breathing would pertain to or come under the same line of thinking in regard to comfort zones and their instability that I have been outlining as the foundation of the entire training. For this reason, if a person puts the cart before the horse, and tries to use the practices addressed to someone who has given up lay life as a shortcut to bypass the awkward work of abandoning lay life themselves, they will not only misunderstand and misrepresent those practices, but in doing so will lose sight of whatever thread of right reflection they might have otherwise been developing[13].

This does not mean that 'only monks can practice mindfulness of breathing'. What it does mean is that you need to be seeing household life as crowded and dusty and acting in accordance with this recognition; not forgetting about it, not acting out of the habitual pressure and anxiety that inevitably arises without the usual distractions from it, training yourself to relinquish it – and only then would mindfulness of the body and of breathing naturally make sense in a way that does not at all compromise the extent of 'homelessness' that you have already developed. Recollection of breathing is nothing but the direct way to undermine any

[12]Which is exactly why such practices are always addressed to monks in the suttas, never to laypeople. And even monks are often specifically told to develop virtue and restraint before practicing mindfulness of the body. (See SN 47.3)

[13]This point is evidenced by the wide variety of current misrepresentations of such instructions, which reduce them to something that not only does not intrinsically require the reflections described above as a necessary basis, but is actually prohibitive of it. It is simply not possible to recollect the fact of living within something that is a comfort zone for you, together with all the uneasy possibilities and risks that this implies in the background of it, while intently focusing on following sensations of breathing in one's body, for example; or trying to not think about anything at all and just let each and every thought drift past.

sense of having a home within your own body, and what makes it impossible to depend on anything in the world that requires the body to be there beforehand – that is to say, anything in the world.

9. As was already briefly mentioned above: when it comes to your own home and situation that you generally take for granted, the less you turn a blind eye to the uncertain and unstable aspects of it that are generally left out of the picture, the less you will be able to carelessly regard it as your own, or to feel really 'at home' in it.

Initially this is bound to feel uneasy. That is why it is called 'confinement,' and that is why you need to develop the ability to withstand whatever anxiety arises on account of that recognition. But it is important to emphasise that it is not this instability or homelessness-amidst-home that is painful, but only the desire and attachment that you are unknowingly activating in regard to it. This is what is uncovered through restraint and the correct lines of reflection.

So the practice is not to just grit your teeth and withstand the pain waiting for the 'opening' to suddenly reveal itself out of nowhere and release you. It is to learn to discern this layer of active involvement and stop fuelling it. The same homelessness amidst-that-which-was-home, which is what *dukkha* is from the point of view of desire and attachment to it, is Nibbana when that desire and attachment is fully relinquished.

There are, bhikkhus, these three kinds of intoxication. What three? Intoxication with youth, intoxication with health, and intoxication with life. ******An uninstructed worldling, intoxicated with youth, engages in misconduct by body, speech, and mind*******. With the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the plane of misery, in a bad destination, in the lower world, in hell.* ******An uninstructed worldling, intoxicated with health, engages in misconduct by body, speech, and mind.******* With the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the plane of misery, in a bad destination, in the lower world, in hell.* ******An uninstructed worldling, intoxicated with life, engages in misconduct by body, speech, and mind.****** *With the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the plane of misery, in a bad destination, in the lower world, in hell.*

"******Intoxicated with youth, a bhikkhu gives up the training and reverts to the lower life; or intoxicated with health, he gives up the training and reverts to the lower life; or intoxicated with life, he gives up the training and reverts to the lower life.******

"Worldlings subject to illness,

old age, and death, are disgusted

[by other people] who exist

in accordance with their nature.

"If I were to become disgusted

with beings who have such a nature,

that would not be proper for me

since I too have the same nature.

"******While I was dwelling thus,******

******having known the state without acquisitions,**********

******I overcame all intoxications—**********

******intoxication with health,**********

******with youth, and with life—**********

******having seen security in renunciation.**********

******"Zeal then arose in me**********

******as I clearly saw nibbāna.**********

******Now I am incapable**********

******of indulging in sensual pleasures.**********

******Relying on the spiritual life,**********

******never will I turn back."**********

AN 3.37

Un-opposing the world (notes on mettā)

by Sister Medhini

> *so mettāsahagatena cetasā ekaṃ disaṃ pharitvā viharati, tathā dutiyaṃ, tathā tatiyaṃ, tathā catthaṃ . iti uddhamadho tiriyaṃ sabbadhi sabbattatāya sabbāvantaṃ lokaṃ mettāsahagatena cetasā vipulena mahaggatena appamāṇena averena abyāpajjena pharitvā viharati*
>
> He lives with one direction pervaded by a mind endowed with friendliness, likewise the second, the third and the fourth. So above, below, across and in all directions, everywhere, he lives with the entire world pervaded by a mind endowed with friendliness – great, exalted and immeasurable, without enmity, without ill-will.
> -MN 7

This passage should be seen as a description of the *nature* of a mind of friendliness. That is, mettā is of a nature to be boundless; to pervade the whole world in all directions without limit. And so any notion of that mind established in mettā needing to direct active effort towards being friendly in regard to particular persons or things is inapplicable. The development of a mind of friendliness *is* the development of a boundless mind.

The description in fact makes no mention of other people, and this is because the purpose of dwelling in mettā (and the other brahmavihāras) is not to live in harmony with others, or to have pleasant thoughts about others. It is in fact totally unconcerned with others. Rather, the purpose is developing the way of living and thinking and seeing the world that does not carry the basis for ill-will or enmity in any shape or to any extent. That is why the mind that has learned the meaning of dwelling in mettā and become established in it to the extent necessary would become incapable of ill-will; enmity becomes literally inconceivable.[14]

The basis of enmity is far broader than one particular mental state, although the state of mind of anger or ill-will is of course the most obvious symptom of it. It encompasses one's whole mode of being; in other words, the capacity for enmity in one's experience is a measure for one's capacity to suffer. It is obvious that becoming free from this can only come from first uncovering and understanding that basis of enmity, which we all end up carrying around with us unless we make the necessary effort to undo it.

Although the purpose of mettā is nothing to do with others, ill-will on the other hand *is* very much concerned with others, or more precisely, with certain orientations and attitudes that infect and affect the whole framework of one's experience of others. Whatever interaction or relationship with others one might have; pleasing or unpleasing, towards love or towards hate; relies on and can only come through that same framework that allows for both. But people generally live entangled with other people and dependent on them physically and emotionally, which means that the framework of others in the most general sense remains perpetually covered up by this entanglement and engagement. As long as it remains covered up, not understood and unabandoned, there is no possibility of a mind of non-enmity.[15]

[14] 'I have developed and cultivated the freedom of the mind by friendliness, made it my vehicle and basis, carried it out, consolidated it, and properly undertaken it, yet ill will still remains, taking over my mind.' He should be told: 'Not so! Do not speak thus. Do not misrepresent the Blessed One; for it is not good to misrepresent the Blessed One. The Blessed One would certainly not speak in such a way. It is impossible and inconceivable, friend, that one might develop and cultivate the freedom of the mind by friendliness, make it one's vehicle and basis, carry it out, consolidate it, and properly undertake it, yet ill will could still remain, taking over one's mind. There is no such possibility. For this, friend, is the escape from ill will, namely, the freedom of the mind by friendliness.' AN 6.13

[15] People are bound by people/ for people depend on people./ People are hurt by people/ and people hurt other people. /Then what is the benefit of people for you,/ or what is created by people? / Having hurt many people/you should leave these people and

Therefore the immediate and basic work to be done by a person who wants to go above enmity, is to separate himself from others in the coarse and obvious ways. To give up, that is, the habits of relying on and using them for safety, pleasure and comfort.[16]

'Others', in the most general sense, as a direction that is always present in any experience (regardless of who or what one regards as pertaining to it at the time), is what practically speaking represents a domain that is characterised by uncertainty and unavailability.

By this I mean that while one can look to other people for what one wants, or can try to help them or affect them in different ways, what makes it possible for them to, for example, either help you or hurt you, to love you or hate you, to react in one way or another in any given situation, is utterly beyond reach. This is the direction from which any threat to one's existence is felt to originate. It is equally the direction from which the greatest and best blessing or good fortune might come. 'Others', in short, means 'there's no saying which way it will go.' No matter how much someone has managed to gain a sense of security and familiarity within certain groups or communities, even if one were to become the ruler of the entire world, there would always remain 'something other' that one has no access to. When it is not ignored, it is what is immediately known as unavailable and by definition impossible to own.

The foundation of enmity can be boiled down to the standpoint and orientation of *opposition* in regard to the domain of others as a whole. This is in common not only to all forms of enmity, fear and ill-will, but equally sensual attraction and emotional dependency.

One can feel opposed to this or that particular person or thing when regarding it specifically as a threat or adversary, but the opposition as it is meant here, as a foundation for living within the sphere where enmity applies, is based in one's internal relationship with the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and imagination; whatever is seen, heard, sensed and imagined; and whatever is felt – agreeable, disagreeable, neither-agreeable-nor-disagreeable – in regard to what is seen, heard, sensed and imagined. It is a matter of, quite literally, 'taking a side' when it comes to the totality of this.

This means, to put this as concisely as possible for the moment, that when it comes to certain aspects of this totality – most fundamentally the sense faculties and what is felt in dependence on them – one is habitually looking past their facticity, towards what one takes for granted as an opposing object, separate and at a distance. And in this way one is implicitly taking the side of the senses – that is, regarding them as personal and holding them dear.

To put this in different words: when something a person sees is pleasing, he habitually 'sticks' to it and welcomes it, while forgetting the seeing of it. When something he sees is displeasing, he habitually rejects and resists it, equally looking past the seeing of it. The same applies to what is heard, smelled, tasted, touched and imagined: either way, whether rejecting or welcoming these things, one is regularly accepting, taking for granted and reinforcing the direction of emphasis that these experiences naturally offer: 'this is the source of my pain'; 'this is the source of my pleasure.' It is in this way that he ends up continually looking past the phenomenon of pain or pleasure as such, and holding *whatever* is felt dearly as his own, whether as 'my suffering' or 'my happiness'. By the same token, the direction of that which he is welcoming or rejecting is constantly being placed and maintained by default on the side of the 'other', that is the opposition.

For as long as someone is living in this way, unknowingly holding the domain of 'others' at a distance and

go.' Thag. 2.15 (Reading 'gaccha taṁ = tvaṁ' in the second last line.)

[16] It might be worth pointing out that running away from everybody and living in a cave is not the way to do this. Physical seclusion *is* useful and necessary to some extent; but simply dwelling alone in and of itself does not teach you how to 'not delight in company.' The purpose of physical seclusion should be seen as training oneself in living 'as one who is alone' even amongst others, and therefore too much of seclusion at the wrong time, and especially undertaken for the wrong reasons, can result in obscuring the problem rather than addressing it. Independence of others is primarily achieved through training in authenticity, morality and renunciation, and by accepting responsibility for one's choices and their consequences. If the relevance of this to ill-will and anger is not obvious, it will become so as one starts actually putting it into practice. But one point that can be mentioned immediately is that this foundational training obviously includes abstaining from acting or speaking from irritation, resentment or other forms of ill-will. In doing so one will already be giving up a whole sphere of enmity that relies on such outward expressions of it for its existence. If one is putting this first and taking it seriously, it will, in the first place, be relatively easy to see where further work of internally disentangling oneself from others applies; and in the second place, the mind will be strong enough to do it. In other words, the following paragraphs will be applicable.

cultivating opposition to it as a whole – he cannot recognise the fact that that entire dimension of 'otherness', together with its undermining and threatening nature and its absolute unreachability, is bound with and inconceivable apart from that very seeing of it that he takes to be 'his' seeing, the hearing he takes to be 'his' hearing, the imagining he takes to be 'his' imagining, and the feeling he takes to be 'his' feeling.[17]

In other words, the unavailability of 'others' as a direction, is what reveals the unavailability of the seeing of them, hearing of them, sensing of them, cognizing of them: one's 'own' senses and feelings in dependence on them belong entirely to the domain of others. And when one can be affected, threatened or enticed by others, it is because one is taking up *these* complete others and holding them as one's own.[18]

By the very fact of taking these complete others as mine, one is at the same time viscerally opposing all that is 'other'. Taking the side of the senses, and taking the side of whatever is felt in dependence on them, entails by definition engaging in a total and absolute resistance to and denial of the whole nature of the domain of others[19]. The dissonance that results from maintaining this contradiction in the heart of one's existence, while doing everything to get away from it apart from looking at it and undoing it, is one way of describing what *dukkha* is in its core. And it is because of this self-generated conflict with the nature of everything- not because of the domain of others being inaccessible and uncertain as it actually is – that it threatens one, oppresses one, and remains as a basis for enmity and ill-will.

So, for as long as a person is regarding his senses and feelings as his personal property, it is impossible not to regard others as *potential* enemies, even if they are not currently seen as his enemies at the time. For the same reason, if one abandons the gratuitous and contradictory taking the side of what does not belong to him, there cannot be any ground for opposition in regard to others, regardless of what they might do. Enmity or ill-will simply cannot apply there. Neither, for that matter, can love or intimacy.

> On seeing a form with the eye, when it is pleasing he is impassioned with it, when it is unpleasing he is averse to it. He dwells without established memory of the body, with a limited mind. And he does not understand the freedom of the mind and the freedom of wisdom as it is, wherein those evil, harmful things cease without remainder. Engaged as he is in favouring and opposing, whatever feeling he feels, – whether pleasant, unpleasant, neither unpleasant nor unpleasant – he delights in that feeling, accepts it and remains holding to it.
> – MN 38

The practical meaning of "dwelling without established memory of the body" in this context is that while this person is impassioned with seeing something pleasing, or averse to something displeasing, he only sees *what* he sees, and forgets the physical 'seeing' of it. (The same goes for all of the other senses, including imagination.)

This apparently insignificant detail, which does not make any material or measurable difference to one's experience, is nonetheless the difference between going with the grain of samsara, and going against it. It is by repeatedly and habitually looking past the 'seeing' while only seeing what one sees, that one becomes opposed to it again and again, and keeps taking the side of the eye that sees, which is the basis for taking up whatever one feels in regard to it.[20] The mind in this way remains bound by that feeling, which again is

[17] See SN 35.68: 'Venerable sir, it is said, 'the world, the world.' In what way, venerable sir, might there be the world or the description of the world?" "Where there is the eye, Samiddhi, where there are sights, eye-consciousness, things to be cognized by eye-consciousness, there the world exists or the description of the world. "Where there is the ear … the imagination, where there are images, imagination-consciousness, things to be cognized by imagination-consciousness, there the world exists or the description of the world.' Also SN 35.116: 'That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world—this is called the world in the Noble One's Discipline. And what, friends, is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world? The eye is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world..'

[18] Here, monk, a monk has heard: "All things are not worth depending on." When a monk has heard this: "All things are not worth depending on," he directly understands the totality. Having directly understood the totality, he fully understands the totality. Having fully understood the totality, he sees all signs as other. He sees the eye as other, sights as other, eye-consciousness as other, eye-contact as other, and whatever arises in dependence on eye-contact, agreeable, disagreeable, neither-agreeable-nor-disagreeable, he sees that as other….(similarly for the other senses.) SN 35.80

[19] This, by the way, applies equally to sensuality as it does to ill-will, both of which rely on opposition to others and denial of the nature of others. This is why abandoning ill-will implies abandoning sensuality as well.

[20] More precisely, agreeability or disagreeability becomes felt as my pain and my pleasure 'in' that body that is being overlooked and taken for granted: in other words, taking the side of the senses makes one liable to be contacted by sights and sounds and to feel pain

how it is bound to opposition and enmity, as well as to birth, death, pain, sorrow, lamentation and despair.

> Now delight in feelings is taking-up (upādana). With his taking-up as condition, being; with being as condition, birth; with birth as condition, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.
> – MN 38

If one, having understood this, does not forget this container of the bodily 'seeing' (and likewise for all other senses) regardless of *what* he is seeing, that is how one begins to establish the correct memory of the body while being within it. Understanding the meaning of this, and training in it throughout one's days and nights, means learning to undo the habit of unknowingly taking the side of the body of senses, and whatever is felt in dependence on it.

> And what, bhikkhus, is the nourishment for the arising of unarisen ill-will, and for the increase and development of arisen ill-will? There is, bhikkhus, the sign for opposition (*paṭighanimittā*). Repeatedly attending that unreflexively – this is the nourishment for the arising of unarisen ill-will, and for the increase and development of arisen ill-will And what, bhikkhus, is the starvation of the arising of unarisen ill-will, and of the increase and development of arisen ill-will? There is, bhikkhus, the freedom of the mind by friendliness (*mettācetovimutti*). Repeatedly attending that reflexively – this is the starvation of the arising of unarisen ill-will, and for the increase and development of arisen ill-will.
> – SN 46.51

'The sign for opposition' (*paṭighanimittā*) and 'the freedom of the mind by friendliness' (*mettācetovimutti*) – these are not to be seen as two entirely separate things that arise independently. Wherever there is the sign for opposition, or to put it another way, the 'offer' of opposition – there is simultaneously the *potential* for the freedom of the mind by friendliness. In other words, that possibility of non-opposition without limit or measure is what is *obscured* by attending wrongly to a situation that naturally 'points' to opposition.

Attending wrongly, unreflexively (ayoniso) to that which 'points' one in the direction of a given opposition, simply means taking this 'sign' at face value and its given emphasis on 'this or that *other thing*' as the source of one's problem (i.e. the source of pain).

Attending rightly, reflexively (yoniso) to the *same* situation with the same significance, means simply *not accepting* at face value its natural pointing towards 'the opposition', while the pressure towards accepting it is there, and not before or after. This is different from totally denying that significance, pretending it is not there, or refusing to acknowledge it. The point is that there is no need to 'do' anything more than *not* take for granted that natural direction of emphasis that points towards 'something' as the cause of the pain one is feeling.

This is also the place to mention that what practically constitutes 'the sign for opposition' on any given occasion (i.e. what it 'points towards') vs the extent of what can become included in the personal side (that on behalf of which one becomes opposed to something else), is not at all fixed; and is determined by how it is regarded and which aspects of the situation are wrongly emphasised and attended; not by their content. Even other people and their feelings can become included into the side that is taken up, on whose behalf one acts towards what is against them; and conversely even the image of one's own self can be taken as the enemy towards which the mind expresses and carries very real ill-will.

An example that might help to illustrate this: suppose a person is feeling displeasure on being given a harsh reprimand or criticism by somebody else. He could accept at face value the 'sign for opposition' that points towards the person who dared criticise him; whether fairly or unfairly, as the source of his own displeasure on hearing it, and that is how he would be implicitly 'taking the side' of that displeasure while becoming opposed to the other person. This is the basis for further resentment towards them; irritation or irrational self-justification, etc. But in the experience of being criticised or reprimanded by somebody else, *their* displeasure or disappointment is also manifested as such. And this 'external' displeasure, if it is what becomes the focus and basis of unreflexive attention, can equally become what is taken up as a standpoint

and pleasure *there* – it 'lands on' that side that one is taking.

for opposition. In other words, there is also the 'sign of opposition' in this situation that points towards 'your behaviour, your action, your thought' as the source of another's pain[21]; and accepting this at face value is how someone can become opposed to and angry with himself 'on behalf of' the feelings of others.[22]

Which of these potential directions one's mind will be inclined to take at any given time depends to some extent on the situation, as well as on the tendencies of an individual. The point is that *anything* that is seen, heard, sensed and imagined can equally become the basis of opposition: the fact that a thought is of 'myself' does not prevent it from being *regarded* as an enemy and in this sense an 'other;' and on the other hand even something that is manifestly and self-evidently outside of one's domain does not prevent it from being taken as an intimate association. In brief, all signs for opposition are equally groundless and all forms of intimacy are equally gratuitous.

Not accepting such sign of opposition at face value, without denying or further interfering with them[23], is how one does not lose sight of the broader perspective in regard to it. And that 'bigger picture' is in itself what can eventually become known as the freedom of the mind by friendliness, by repeatedly undoing and not accepting the given emphasis towards opposition.[24]

This does not feel like the friendliness one is used to, which is always 'in relation to' enmity, which depends on intimacy and on people. (And for this reason, if one does not stick to developing it to the sufficient degree in spite of its not feeling 'right' according to what he expects, he will not recognise it for what it is.) Mettā is, rather, the ultimate non-enmity amidst enmity: while the conflicts and hostilities inevitably go on within the domain of others, the mind that, through training, has been withdrawn from both entanglement and opposition in regard to the totality of that domain, sees its full extent and is without a stake in any part of it, *cannot help* but dwell with non-enmity that is truly without limit and that pervades every direction.

> *susukhaṃ vata jīvāma, verinesu averino. verinesu manussesu, viharāma averino.*
>
> So very happily we live! – without enmity amidst enemies. Among mankind in enmity, rid of enmity we dwell.
> -Dhp 197
>
> *sa sabbadhammesu visenibhūto, yaṃ kiñci diṭṭhaṃ va sutaṃ mutaṃ vā. tameva dassiṃ vivaṭaṃ carantaṃ, kenīdha lokasmi vikappayeyya.*
>
> In regard to all things he has become unopposed/ disassociated – Whatever seen, heard or

[21] The same principle of taking up the side of other people's feelings can of course also lead towards enmity in regard to other things that are 'further' opposed to them. One example of this being taken to extremes would be when people, on hearing news reports of injustice and oppression of people in a distant country which they cannot point to on a map, nevertheless feel the pain of that whole nation of individuals and take it upon themselves. Because of unknowingly taking the side of this pain, they also take up the opposition of the oppressors and willingly volunteer to fight in a war against them.

[22] The only way that anger or harshness of others directed at one can become felt internally (i.e., that one can be affected by it) is by the mind accepting it and 'replicating' it on its own, so to speak. This of course does not only apply to 'self-hatred' specifically, but becoming affected by the feelings and actions of others in any manner. See SN 7.2: ' "What do you think, brahmin, do your friends and colleagues, kinsmen, relatives or guests come to see you?" "Sometimes they do, Master Gotama." "And what do you think, brahmin, do you offer them cooked food or uncooked food, or something to taste?" "Sometimes I do, Master Gotama." "But if they, brahmin, do not accept, to whom does that then belong?" "If they, Master Gotama, do not accept, that still belongs to us." "Just so, brahmin, when you abuse us who are not abusing, try to anger us who are unangered, quarrel with us who are not quarrelling, we do not accept that from you. It still belongs to you, brahmin! It still belongs to you." '

[23] For example: falling into replacing one source of opposition with another ('It's not his fault, it's *my* fault'); sorting out in one's mind exactly who was wrong and who was right according to some external standard; trying to replace an 'irrational' thought ('I feel like so-and-so might hate me') with a rationalised version of it ('I am imagining things, they don't hate me') trying to prevent the displeasure one felt from arising, or thinking it 'shouldn't' arise; replacing unpleasant thoughts with pleasant thoughts, practicing forgiveness, etc. All of these might end up being done when one has no other recourse, and if they are the only alternative to acting out of coarse anger, it is still better than the former; but fundamentally all such interferences assume the same basis of opposition and are done on top of it; and thus cannot possibly bring one closer to understanding or undermining it.

[24] It should hopefully go without saying that all of the above is utterly inapplicable for as long as somebody is doing actions with body, speech and to some extent with thought, which are based on already accepting the sign towards opposition; and already mentally favouring or resisting whatever is seen, heard, imagined, etc. This acceptance is what practically translates to being 'directed' towards specific actions and behaviours of the unwholesome variety. Therefore the root of opposition 'below' this, can only become discernible when one is withdrawn from physically engaging in those behaviours. For almost everyone, withdrawing from this constitutes the vast majority of the work.

thought. Living transparently seeing like this, By what in the world could one define him?
-Snp 4.4

On the Simile of the Wet Sticks

By Sister Medhini

"It occurred to me, Prince: 'Whenever ascetics or brahmins of the past felt harsh, severe, piercing, and painful feelings through their own exertion, the utmost was this; there is no more than this. And whenever ascetics or brahmins of the future will feel harsh, severe, piercing, and painful feelings through their own exertion, the utmost will be this; there is no more than this. And whatever ascetics or brahmins now feel harsh, severe, piercing, and painful feelings through their own exertion, the utmost is this; there is no more than this. And yet, through the practice of these severe austerities, I have not achieved anything beyond the mundane – any knowledge and vision worthy of a noble one. Could there be another path to awakening?'

"Then, Prince, three similes came to me, not learned before, not heard before.

"Suppose there were a wet piece of wood, full of sap and lying in the water. And a man were to come along taking an upper fire-stick – 'I will start a fire; I will generate heat.'
What do you think, Prince: would that man, having taken the upper fire-stick and rubbing it on the wet piece of wood, full of sap and lying in the water, be able to start a fire and generate heat?"

"No indeed, Bhante. Why is that? Because the piece of wood is wet and full of sap, and moreover it is lying in the water; that man would be heir to only weariness and frustration."

"Just in this way, Prince, whatever ascetics and brahmins do not live withdrawn from sensuality in body, and in whom desire for sensuality, love for sensuality, preoccupation with sensuality, thirst for sensuality, and zeal for sensuality are internally not well abandoned and thoroughly calmed: even if those good ascetics and brahmins feel harsh, severe, piercing, and painful feelings through their own exertion, they are incapable of knowledge, vision, and unsurpassed enlightenment; and even if they do not feel harsh, severe, piercing, and painful feelings through their own exertion, they are incapable of knowledge, vision, and unsurpassed enlightenment.

"That was the first simile that came to me, not learned before, not heard before.

"Furthermore, Prince, a second simile came to me, not learned before, not heard before: Suppose there were a wet piece of wood, full of sap and lying on the ground far from water. And a man were to come along, taking an upper fire-stick – 'I will start a fire; I will generate heat.'
What do you think, Prince: would that man, having taken the upper fire-stick and rubbing it on the wet piece of wood, full of sap and lying on the ground far from water, be able to start a fire and generate heat?"

"No indeed, Bhante. Why is that? Because however far it may be lying from the water, that piece of wood is still wet and full of sap; that man would be heir to only weariness and frustration."

"Just in this way, Prince, whatever ascetics and brahmins live withdrawn from sensuality in body, yet in whom desire for sensuality, love for sensuality, preoccupation with sensuality, thirst for sensuality, and zeal for sensuality are internally not well abandoned and thoroughly calmed: even if those good ascetics and brahmins feel harsh, severe, piercing, and painful feelings through their own exertion, they are incapable of knowledge, vision, and unsurpassed enlightenment; and even if they do not feel harsh, severe, piercing, and painful feelings through their own exertion, they are incapable of knowledge, vision, and unsurpassed enlightenment.

"That was the second simile that came to me, not learned before, not heard before.

"Furthermore, Prince, a third simile came to me, not learned before, not heard before: Suppose there were a dry and sapless piece of wood, lying on the ground far from water. And a man

were to come along taking an upper fire-stick – 'I will start a fire; I will generate heat.' What do you think, Prince: would that man, having taken the upper fire-stick and rubbing it on the dry, sapless piece of wood, lying on the ground far from water, be able to start a fire and generate heat?"

"Yes, Bhante. Why is that? Because the piece of wood is dry and sapless, and moreover it is lying on the ground far from water."

"Just in this way, Prince, whatever ascetics and brahmins live withdrawn from sensuality in body, and in whom desire for sensuality, love for sensuality, preoccupation with sensuality, thirst for sensuality, and zeal for sensuality is internally well abandoned and thoroughly calmed: even if those good ascetics and brahmins feel harsh, severe, piercing, and painful feelings through their own exertion, they are capable of knowledge, vision, and ultimate enlightenment; and even if they do not feel harsh, severe, piercing, and painful feelings through their own exertion, they are capable of knowledge, vision, and ultimate enlightenment.

"That was the third simile that came to me, not learned before, not heard before.

"It occurred to me, Prince: 'I remember sitting in the shade of a rose-apple tree, while my father the Sakyan was busy, and withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unwholesome things, with thinking and pondering, and with joy and happiness born of seclusion, I dwelled having established myself in the first meditation. Could that be the path to awakening?'[25]
And following that memory, I had the recognition: '*That* is the path to awakening!'
I thought: 'Now why am I afraid of that pleasure which is entirely apart from the pleasure of sensuality, apart from unwholesome things?' I thought: 'I am no longer afraid of that pleasure, which is entirely apart from the pleasure of sensuality and apart from unwholesome things.' "
– MN 36

In the Pāli versions of MN 85 and MN 36, the simile of the wet sticks occurs *before* the Bodhisatta began his extreme ascetic practices. In the Sanskrit parallel of this account in the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, it occurs after he had already undergone them. Not only does this make far more sense in the narrative of the sutta as a whole – the full weight and significance of the simile only appears when considered in this particular context, and this has some very real practical implications.

I want to make it clear at the outset that I am not interested in debating which of these texts or traditions is earlier or more authoritative. This is not a textual or historical issue; it is a practical one regarding what exactly constitutes the path to freedom from suffering, and how that path can be realised. The Sanskrit parallel provides a starting point for thinking about this, but all that follows would hold true even if there were no parallel.

The meaning of the simile is very clear and straightforward. Its purpose is, firstly, to illustrate that it is impossible to arrive at clarity of understanding or knowledge of truth without being thoroughly withdrawn from sensuality, and without having calmed the desire internally for sensuality. Secondly, it is to show that going beyond this in creating self-inflicted pain for its own sake is redundant and has no benefit. Every section of the simile repeats that the dryness of the sticks is the factor that determines the capacity for awakening, and self-mortification makes no difference.

A further implication that can be gathered from this is that engaging in a practice of self-mortification towards the goal of awakening would not only be useless, but would in its own way constitute an obstacle. This is because doing so would necessarily come through the view, or at least the hope, that this activity, as opposed to *merely* withdrawing from sensual actions, words, thoughts, and inclinations, could somehow contribute to higher knowledge and understanding.

This would imply a failure to understand the principle that the simile of the wet sticks illustrates: that knowledge and vision is obscured by one's own *wilful engagement* in sense desires, and one's own emotional

[25] In spite of traditional accounts, there is no indication that the Buddha was a child at this time. In the *Saṅghabhedavastu* (Vol. I, pp. 76–77), the account is that the Bodhisatta had been sent to oversee some farm work by his father, and was struck with dread and sense of urgency on seeing the affliction of the people and animals at work. It was with this same sense of urgency that he then sat down under the rose-apple tree, his mind turned away from sensuality.

stickiness in regard to that state of sensual existence. Whatever the extent of that stickiness and dependence on sense pleasures that a given individual starts with, is not there because of failing to put himself through arbitrary forms of self-inflicted discomfort. It is there because he is actively maintaining it through choices and actions by body, speech and mind. Although the process of withdrawal from this engagement will also inevitably be uncomfortable for one who has been dependent on it, there is all the difference in the world between pain of *withdrawal* from dependency, and pain upon which one *becomes dependent* as a means of purification. It is the latter that is totally without benefit.

It is quite implausible that having thought along these lines, the Bodhisatta would *then* go on to engage in self-mortification practices regardless.

Even more importantly, the weight and significance of the similes increases in the context of their occurring as a consequence of the Bodhisatta's recognition of the total futility of the ascetic practices he had been engaging in. To understand this point, it is necessary to think in some depth about the significance of such recognition and what is required to arrive at it.

It might be imagined that anyone who were to spend long enough engaging in some practice that is clearly not leading to the goal it is supposed to, would eventually arrive at the same conclusion that the Bodhisatta did in this situation. The reality, however, is almost the exact opposite. Investment in any practice towards liberation, no matter how painful from an external standpoint, gathers its own momentum and internally becomes a place of safety in itself. As such, it becomes exceedingly difficult to relinquish, even for one who might be well aware that he has not reached his intended aim.

For a person in such a position, the natural implication of giving up what they have been doing, and admitting that *all of this was for nothing*, is that the goal they were striving for is also to be given up. In other words, giving up something that has become identified with "practice towards enlightenment", effectively means "returning to sensuality." It is impossible to entirely relinquish the extreme of self-mortification and just *happen* to stay there by circumstance, without falling back into the other extreme – for the simple reason that to do so requires one to remain entirely confined within the resulting doubt, lack of resolution, sense of failure and untetheredness, and *not* latch onto something else to fill that void. Even if there is someone (such as a Buddha) to tell you that this is in fact where you *should* stay, in spite of it feeling like the most unnatural and wrong thing to do, following that instruction requires significant authenticity and strength of mind. Without any such indication of a word of another, the fact that someone nonetheless does so to a sufficient degree and for a sufficient time for wisdom to arise through it, is what makes the arising of a Buddha miraculous.

It is in this context that the simile of the wet sticks arises and carries even more weight, as precipitated by the reflection: "I have not, through the practice of these severe austerities, achieved anything beyond the mundane, knowledge and vision worthy of a noble one. Could there be another path to awakening?"
It is very important to note that the similes (unlike the memory of jhāna which follows the line in the Pāli sutta) do not immediately or directly *answer* this somewhat desperate question "could there be another path to awakening?" – the core of which is the even more universal dilemma that can be simply expressed as: "What on earth do I *do*?"

What the similes do reflect, in this context, is the recognition that
1) Regardless of what might or might not constitute the path to awakening, and even if there were to be no path at all to be found, returning to sensuality would be a separate action that carries no benefit and only harm.
2) Regardless of what exactly constitutes the specific path to awakening, sensuality *by definition* can only hinder it. As long as there is mental delight in sensuality (let alone actions, words and thoughts based on that delight), there cannot be knowledge, vision and clarity of insight any more than there can be fire and water in the same place at the same time.
3) The further confirmation that not only were these particular self-mortification practices futile; in its very nature self-mortification makes no difference towards the goal.

In short, the significance of the similes is that although one might still not know "what to do," it can still be clear what *not* to do: everything else is secondary to the dryness of the sticks, which is only accomplished

by actually disengaging from sensual desires both physically and mentally.
It is at this point that it would make very natural sense for the Bodhisatta to recall a time in which his mind had already been thoroughly and entirely turned away from desire and sensuality, and to realise that this, in fact, is the path to awakening.

In other words, the most significant insight that this sutta describes is not actually that jhāna, even understood as this state of complete seclusion from desires, *is* the path to awakening in itself. (If abiding in jhāna alone were fully sufficient for awakening, the Bodhisatta's earlier experience of it should have resulted in him becoming the Buddha there and then.) The point, which is subtle and all too easily overlooked, is in the understanding of the value of withdrawal from desire, for its own sake.

This is also what distinguishes jhāna from the attainments the Buddha had already achieved under the ascetics Āḷāra Kalāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. The establishment of mind in the dimension of nothingness, or the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, most certainly also entails thorough withdrawal from sensuality; because in order to be established upon such a phenomenon, everything below, inferior or more particular than that phenomenon needs to be overcome. This includes sense pleasures of any kind. The difference in this case, however, is that although the same work to abandon sense pleasures is being done[26], it is done in virtue of looking towards and resting on a higher thing, with the emphasis on *that*. Although the mind's elevation above such desires will indeed entail genuine peace, such a person will inevitably regard the peace they experience as being rooted in that dimension, because of *its* elevation or loftiness. So, one who has abandoned sense pleasures on account of something else, will not be able to rightly recognise the benefit of withdrawal from that extent of desire in and of itself. Nevertheless, the factual dispassion for sensuality and development of composure that would be required to abide in these dimensions, is the very reason that these teachers were later said to have "little dust in their eyes".

In the same way, although the earlier dwelling in jhāna that the Buddha recollected did not result in awakening at the time, later after giving up his practice of self-mortification he was able to realise: "*This* is the path to awakening!"

The difference here is not in some "extra step" (which the sutta nowhere mentions) – it is the *understanding* of where the value of it is.

So, although the order and placement of the simile of the sticks and the memory of the first jhāna are comparatively minor details, their significance and implications are not; both for how we understand the work undergone by the Buddha, and, by extension, how we understand our own work toward the same goal.

Whatever might be the reason for the position of the simile in the Pāli, the result is that it can be quite easily overlooked and regarded as almost incidental – not significantly influencing the Bodhisatta's own actions before or after; certainly not the defining factor in opening the middle way. Instead, the seemingly fortuitous and circumstantial arising of a past memory of jhāna is what appears to have *truly* revealed the path to enlightenment. One who sees his own task in the same light can all too easily allow himself to regard the abandonment of sensuality itself as similarly incidental – despite the simile itself directly contradicting this – while expecting the true breakthrough to arise through something that simply *happens* to occur (perhaps after sufficient time spent engaging in some equally arbitrary practice).

But the simile of the wet sticks is the opposite of incidental. It reflects the very recognition of where the path to awakening is, and WHY it must be so. As the simile itself directly says, knowledge and vision depends on thorough disengagement from sensual desires. And the value of that disengagement is not something that can be understood by means of engagement and dependence, whether on pleasure or pain. It can only become apparent when all such options of engagement have been closed off and abandoned. In the Bodhisatta's case, this could only come about through the sheer exhaustion of all those options, and the refusal to totally forgo the goal of peace in spite of that exhaustion. If someone today wants to pursue the

[26] Note well that what is described here is very different from simply *replacing* one's usual sensual desires with something else, as can quite commonly be done through various forms of religious practice: by replacing worldly pleasures with love of God, meditative calm, or some equivalent. In such cases sensuality is not really being given up at all – the very same desire is merely being directed elsewhere and obscured, not tamed. And so if, for whatever reason, one were to lose one's faith in God (or otherwise lose that which has been standing in place of sensuality), those same sensual pleasures and desires would be right there waiting, and one could very well still go back to them.

same goal, the principle is the same; but renunciation and disengagement can be directly trained, without wasting time in other pointless avenues. This is what the gradual training of the suttas describes.

Light and Vision

by Sister Medhini

> "Here, Bhante, as we are dwelling diligent, ardent, and resolute, we are aware of light together with vision of images. And yet, before long, our light disappears with the vision of images, and we have not comprehended the cause."
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> "Indeed, Anuruddha and friends, you should comprehend the cause. I too, Anuruddha and friends, before awakening, as an unawakened bodhisatta, was aware of light together with vision of images. And yet, before long, my light disappeared with the vision of images. It occurred to me: 'For what reason, on what basis, do my light and vision of images disappear?' It occurred to me: 'Doubt arose in me, and through doubt my composure fell away; with the falling of composure my light disappeared with the vision of images. So I will work in such a way that doubt does not arise in me again … inattention arose in me … sloth and laziness arose in me … fright arose in me … excitement arose in me … sluggishness arose in me … too-tight energy arose in me … too-slack energy arose in me … longing arose in me…varied perception arose in me … As I was dwelling diligent, ardent, and resolute, I was aware of light together with vision of images. And yet, before long, my light disappeared with the vision of images. It occurred to me: 'For what reason, on what basis, do my light and vision of images disappear?' It occurred to me: 'Over-contemplating of images arose in me, and through over-contemplating of images my composure fell away; with the falling of composure my light disappeared with the vision of images. So I will work in such a way that over-contemplating of images does not arise in me again.' "
> – MN 128
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> There is, Vāseṭṭha, the occasion sooner or later when, after the passing of a long time, this world dissolves. While the world is dissolving, the majority of beings are tending in the direction of radiant gods. There, they are mind-made, nourished by joy; with light of their own, living in the sky, remaining lovely, and there they stay for a very long duration.
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> There is, Vāseṭṭha, the occasion sooner or later when, after the passing of a long time, this world evolves. With the evolution of the world, the majority of beings, falling away from the radiant-body, come to this world. There they are mind-made, nourished by joy, with light of their own, living in the sky, remaining lovely, and there they stay for a very long duration.
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> But at that time, Vāseṭṭha, it was watery in nature, intensely dark and gloomy. There was no discerning the sun and the moon, nor stars and constellations, nor day and night, nor female and male; beings simply were reckoned as beings.
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> Then, for those beings at some time or other, after the passing of a very long time, a flavourful solid came to be laid over the water. It was just like a skin from the cooling of milk; that was how it appeared. It had a delightful colour, a delicious smell, a delicious flavour. Its colour was just like ghee or butter and just as delightful; its flavour was just like pure wild bee honey, and just as delicious.
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> Then, Vāseṭṭha, a certain being, reckless in character, thinking, "See now, just what might this be?", tasted the flavourful solid with their finger. As they tasted it, craving entered into them. Other beings too, getting the idea of that being and following along with it, tasted the flavourful solid with their fingers. As they tasted it, craving entered into them. Then, Vāseṭṭha, those beings went to partake of that flavourful solid, breaking off pieces of it with their hands.
>
> When they went to partake of it and broke off pieces with their hands, then, for those beings, their own light disappeared. With the disappearance of their own light, the sun and the moon

> appeared. With the appearance of the sun and the moon, the stars and constellations appeared; with the appearance of the stars and constellations, day and night were discerned. When day and night were discerned, months and days were discerned. When months and days were discerned, seasons and years were discerned. To that extent, Vāseṭṭha, the world was evolved.
> – DN 27

> So happily we live, we who have nothing of ours. We will be nourished by joy, like the radiant gods.
> – Dhp 200

To start from the ground up: all life is equally subject to the pressures and demands of elements. The potential to choose how to respond to those demands is the difference between vegetative organisms and conscious beings. Trees, for instance, modify their growth patterns in response to sunlight. But in the case of a tree, the nature of that response is, as far as we can tell from our point of view, absolute; unmediated by any possibility of choosing to do otherwise. Touch of sunlight directly and without exception translates to movement in the direction of the sunlight. For that very reason, that movement cannot properly be called "action," insofar as it is not a conscious or deliberate choice, but a pure reaction. And where conscious choice is absent or in abeyance, there can be no self-awareness, or even the ability to distinguish between one thing and another.

In the animal realm, there is at least some capacity for restraint and hence choice, although it is both limited and rarely exerted. Animals, for the overwhelming majority of the time, behave rather like trees in that they simply respond to what nature asks of them as quickly and directly as they can.

The scope of the human realm is wider. It is characterised by a certain baseline level of self-awareness, of which the most obvious symptom is speech. As humans, we can speak about doing something, or wanting to do something, without doing it. This already outlines a capacity for intentional restraint which is largely lacking in the animal realm.

At the same time, human life is rooted in the same organic matter as plant life that exists to grow and reproduce; and revolves, for the most part, around sensory experiences. The potential for self-awareness and restraint is generally used as little as possible and held in rather poor regard.

In the reverse direction from the "animalistic" mode of being with which many people will be familiar as a default state, there is *brahmacariya*: celibacy, the renunciate life or, literally, "living as gods."

In light of the above, we need not understand this term as wholly metaphorical. If the direction towards immersion in sense-desires is there, its extreme side emulating existence as an animal, so is, by the same token, the direction towards separation from sensuality that results in living and seeing as if through the eyes of the gods.

Jhāna can be thought of as the practice of brahmacariya on this level that is closest to the literal meaning of the word: the elevation of the mind entirely above the sensual domain, while still living with a human body based in the sensory world. Celibacy, virtue and sense restraint all lead in the same direction and emulate the principle of non-sensuality. But it is only where there is complete separation from sense-dependent existence, with joy born of that separation, that one can be said to be seeing through non-sensual (super-human) eyes. Separation from sensuality is precisely what defines that type of "vision" and this is why it is the tool for overcoming animal eyes and sensual existence.

What kind of vision is this?

If one were to live entirely like an unrestrained animal, the mere arising of a fearful sight would immediately imply action to get away from it. The arising of a desired object would effectively equate to the pursuit of it. When there is no restraint, there is no space between an object and an action towards it. Or more precisely, the space that is there, or could be there, becomes completely invisible. It does not appear for you. All you see is the object that you want or the object that you hate; your own actions, aims, intentions, breadth of possibilities in regard to it are kept unseen. At the extreme end of this that emulates the animal realm, objects imply only reaction, and everything in between is passed over and obscured.

So, even to consider and be able to articulate different possibilities as opposed to merely giving in to a desire, already demonstrates a relative degree of vision in regard to those very possibilities and actions; in regard to the situation as a whole in which those possibilities exist. If one were not to see these things at all, one would not be able to think about them or consequently speak about them.

Yet this degree of vision is still almost blind by the standards of brahmacariya. And this can equally be known right here and now: you can know that there are things that could arise within the body, or through the senses, that would make you feel as though you cannot freely consider any range of possibilities in regard to them. You would just react, or feel constrained and pressured to act in one particular direction – or simply become stricken with confusion and doubt.

So when something that could arise through the senses implies, or pressures one toward, reaction by body, speech or mind; and when this implication is overlooked and taken for granted, the mind's eye is blind to the "image" of that arisen thing, and cannot understand it.

One remains then living *in* and *amidst* the world and the senses – by continually acting out of the pressures of the elements, and accepting the relationship between those pressures and the thoughts and actions for them. This is a state in which one lives perpetually, regardless of whether there is an immediate and acute pressure currently affecting one. The point is that at any given time, one is liable to be swayed, burdened and moved by things that one does not fully understand.

This ever-present liability is what it means to live under the weight of hindrances, which are obscurity in themselves. That is why the Buddha says in MN 128 that the mental movements of doubt, excitement, agitation, over-attention, and so on, are what bring darkness and shut down both light and vision. In the stock descriptions of jhāna in the suttas, what one is being separated from is the state of living and thinking that is under the influence of these same tendencies. It is this separation that gives rise to joy and happiness.

And, in DN 27, when the beings with light of their own and nourished by joy began to go after tastes, their own light disappeared. For as long as one is making oneself existentially and emotionally dependent on external things that require external, fleshy eyes and sunlight, there is no clarity of internal vision possible. The mind's eye remains darkened.

Imagine, then, if you were to train in the reverse direction, of brahmacariya, to the point that any such relationship with and constraint of the body would become entirely undone and powerless. Regardless of what might arise through any of the six senses, that could not imply or induce desire, or doubt, or panic, or movement. Any such arisen thing would be clearly seen in its entirety – not through any mystical revelation, but simply because there is nothing obstructing it. It would feel like relief from debt, or being released from a prison. This is what would, if sufficiently steadied and developed, become the unencumbered mind's eye that sees in all directions – the vision of the gods.